Tuesday next, April 15th: First showing in many years of John Ford's thus-far non-televisioned "THE PLough AND THE STARS" (1936) with Barbara Stanwyck and Preston Foster.

April 8 1969

A POT-POURRI OF EARLY TRICK FILMS  2 reels

We regret that pressure of time hasn't made it possible for us to as yet trace credits and years, or to have individual titles made up for the segments, but it's still a fascinating little group of vignettes from 1902 on, mainly French and Melias, but with a couple of British primitives thrown in too. The charm, the imagination and the sheer skill of the often very complicated trickery is quite breath-taking. One or two of the items, such as "A Trip to the Moon" and "The Devil's Charlot", are familiar, but most of it is fresh, and particularly delightful is a French animated cartoon treatise on the evils of drink, showing how alcohol inevitably leads to the insane asylum, and that true athletes drink only water!

WHAT PRICE GOOFTY? (Hal Roach-Pathe, 1925) Director: Leo McCarey; 2 reels
With Charley Chase, Jane Sherman, Marjorie Whiteis, Lucien Littlefield, Katherine Grant, Noah Young, Fay Wray, and Buddy the dog.

Although this doesn't quite make it into the top Chase bracket, it's still a delightful little romp, with Chase as usual making far more out of the in-and-out-of-doors script than it deserves. His constant "betrayals" by a fun-loving puppy provide subtle moments however, and even if it runs out of steam a bit at the end, it's still a very funny comedy. Incidentally, it was also the very first of well over twenty films over the next decade to paraphrase "What Price Glory?" via its title, although obviously it was kidding the name of the day, since it preceded the film version by over a year.

- intermission -

"THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE". (Australia, 1918) Director: Raymond Longford
Produced by Southern Cross Features; based on the narrative poem by C.J. Dennis; Camera: Arthur Higgins; 8 reels
Leading players: Arthur Tauchert, Lottie Lyall, Gilbert Emery.
Print source: The National Film Library, Canberra; loaned through the courtesy of the Canadian Film Institute, Ottawa, to whom we are most grateful.

Even though it has a long and honorable history, going back to the very earliest days of the 1900's, nobody has ever taken the Australian film too seriously. Admittedly, the great bulk of their product consisted of regional comedies and simple actioners, and their "star" roster was so unimpressive that many slipping Hollywood names had to be imported to add lustre to them. (Although of course, a great many Australian actors, among them Cecil Kellaway, Ann Richards and Errol Flynn, found a variable measure of fame in Hollywood).

But one discovery like "The Sentimental Bloke" (its director, Raymond Longford, was considered Australia's finest during the silent period) makes one realize how one just can't afford to dismiss any country's work on the convenient theory that if one hasn't yet seen any great films from that source, then there can't be any. Actually I hesitate to call "The Sentimental Bloke" a great film, since it depends so much on one's own emotional response to it. I suspect many of you will love it and find it, as I do, a genuine revelation; others (and to a degree, understandably so) may hate it. But it deserves a chance and every consideration you can give it. I can find no trace of a U.S. release for the film - certainly in 1918 there would be little need or market for it here in its original form - and this may well be the only American exposure it will get.

Even the Australians, justly proud of the film, tend to build up its virtues (its integrity, its sophisticated handling of people) rather out of due proportion in order to excuse what they consider its weaknesses - cheapness, "primitive" facilities, and lack of studio sets. But it needs no such apology. A tremendous critical and public success, due partly of course to the popularity of Dennis' poem, it immediately inspired a sequel, "Ginger Mick" (1920) by the same producers and with the same cast. It was also remade twice, once as a talkie, and some ten years ago followed the usual route of being turned into a musical comedy for the theatre. As with "The Crowd" and "Sunrise" however, it would seem to be the kind of film that could only really work as a silent - and probably only the first time it was made. I haven't seen either of the remakes, but they are not well regarded by the Australians.
For some inexplicable reason (perhaps its milieu, certainly not its plot content) it reminds me rather of the modern story of "Intolerance". There are obvious signs here and there that Griffith's work was familiar to Longford; but on the other hand, the Griffith "flavor" is rather unintentionally boosted by the fact that the semi-rural Sydney locations lock exactly like Port Lee, and one is constantly coming across scenes that thus look, physically, like moments from such Griffith Biographies as "Through Darkening Vales" and "For His Son".

That the film still succeeds so well is in one way quite remarkable, for it has two distinct disadvantages to overcome. First and foremost, there is the "hero" played by Arthur Tauchert. While he was hand-picked by Longford, and presumably played it exactly as directed, he is a peculiarly graceless and unattractive fellow. Additionally, a good-looking, virile lad would have been all wrong; but conversely, this isn't the tale of a Marty, a man rejected for his ugliness. The Sentimental Bloke could have been a James Murray or a Thomas Mitchell, but Tauchert is closer to Fred Kohler, and he is fortunate indeed that his beloved Doreen takes such a liking to him. (contemporary) drawback is in the prolonged use of the colloquial slang verse for titles. Obviously its use was essential: it provides both the narrative and a sense of rhythm. But even in 1918 it was a rather condescendingly lower-class slang; today, much of it would be as incomprehensible to the average Australian as it must be to us. Much of it does have a real beauty, and all of it somehow becomes acceptable after a while, with the meaning of certain words becoming obvious just through their repetition. However, it's fortunate indeed that we didn't double-bill it with our last program's "The Night Bird" (with its prolonged phonetic pidgin-Italian titles) - or with William S. Hart's "Finto Ben", with its incredibly top-heavy non-rhyming poetic titles.

Although "The Sentimental Bloke" has charm and humor - and certainly honesty - its plot content is probably its least interesting aspect. Dramatically, it does tend to go downhill a bit in the closing sequences, the marriage being much less interesting than the courtship. (But perhaps this is a reflection of life too!) But it has no many other percentages of interest. Filmmatically, it is deceptively simple, yet remarkably skilful and self-assured. Considering that it must have been a cheap film to make, and that time was money, there is an incredible number of set-ups and change of angle for a given scene. It's often cut in rhythm with the verse, and the long shots, the closeups, the cutaways, all come exactly at the right moment. Scenes are short and to the point, very much in the post-"Intolerance" but pre-20's manner. There are no arty tricks, but the camerawork and lighting are often most inventive: the beach scenes (possibly enhanced by toning or hand-coloring originally?) have an old-world picture postcard look, and a visit to the theatre (the Palace, in Sydney) is climaxed by a horizontally descending fade, which duplicates the final curtain.

On another level, "The Sentimental Bloke" is a thoroughly fascinating study of both the social progress and mechanical backwardness of Australia in 1918. Victoria was one of the first places in the world to give women the vote, and the film reflects this as it shows women going their way, with total self-assurance in the men's world of factory and small business. Even lesser scenes with women ring true; barmarks have to be licensed in Victoria, the jobs prized, and once obtained, held on to like grim death - so the barmarks in this film are crome-like biddies, a far cry from the stereotyped Virginia Field glamour girls that Hollywood usually gives us in Australian-locused movies.

Incredibly, almost no automobiles or trucks are seen throughout the film. The poem was a contemporary one, so the producers were not trying to recreate an earlier era; in any case, shooting in a major city would have made that virtually impossible. One sees horses and carts constantly; once or twice, in a shop window one does get a glimpse of a passing street-car; but only towards the end of the film does one really see a car, and then it's the car of a country doctor, far out of the city. Even Sydney's Grand Central Station, shown from various angles, doesn't offer a single automobile or taxi-cab. Of course, Sydney's streets were notoriously narrow, expanded from what were originally ox-cart roads, and many of the areas used in the film were semi-private and rural communities where autos were forbidden; but even so, it's a bit jarring to see street scenes in 1918 in one of Australia's major cities where the transportation is still essentially horse-drawn! Australia as a whole was undergoing great change then, and apart from the purely mechanical aspect, "The Sentimental Bloke" is, like Bouquier's "Farrebique", also a kind of folk-story of a disappearing way of life. Although it disappeared slowly within the British Empire -- the claustrophobic Victorian decor and bito-a-brac in the living rooms of houses was still very common in Britain in the 30's, and still hasn't vanished entirely from the homes of older people.
Quite incidentally, and without striving to make a point of it, the film points up Australia's kinship with England quite plainly. . . . take away those titles, and without changing a single item of dress or characterisation, it could all equally well be taking place in any North of England industrial town.

Apart from one sequence shot in Melbourne, the entire film was photographed in and around Sydney, and a couple of footnotes may be of some interest. The scene of the hero and heroine's break-up - outdoors, by a white fence - was photographed less than a hundred yards from the spot where Jack Johnson fought for the world's championship. And the impressive cliff-edge - used for the dream-sequence fight - was and is known as The Gap, Sydney's famous suicide-leap location, mecca for despondent lovers and American tourists. The semi-slum, or at least working-class, cottages in which the protagonists live, definitely considered the "other side of tracks" in 1918, have now been taken over by the chi-chi artist crowd, and turned into a kind of Greenwich Village colony. And the game of "Two-Up" that a group of characters play at one point, is (or at least, was) very much against the law in Australia, despite the minimal amounts involved in the gambling; hence the rather furtive and unexplained haste with which the game is played.

Lottie Lyall, the rather charming Maid Markey-ish heroine, died in 1925; Tauchert played in a number of the bigger Australian films of the 20's, including Charles Chauvel's "Nohr of Noolbool" and "Adorable Outcast". Gilbert Emery, lean and athletic, nowhere suggests the suave dignity he would bring to his Hollywood films in the 30's and 40's, invariably cast as the British aristocrat or the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard. Numerous other players, not credited in the main titles (or our credits on page one) are identified throughout the film, but none of them appear to be major actors. Some are presumably friends or appropriate "types" picked up on location, and are often a bit ill at ease. The brother of cameraman Arthur Higgins can also be seen lolling on the porch at a party scene late in the film.

The film's sound track consists of a piano score by Tom King, who played at the premiere in Adelaide. At times it is too heavy and obvious (a lashing of Tchaikowsky's "Romeo and Juliet" played straight when the treatment is comic and ironic, at a stage performance of that play), at other times rather too casual and off-the-cuff. And yet, somehow, it seems right: it catches the free and easy spirit of the film much more than a carefully arranged (and probably too ponderous) selection of records could hope to do, so despite its erratic qualities and occasionally low volume, we're going to use it too.

William K. Everson